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School classes for talented pupils

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Introduction

The provision of appropriate educational challenges for the most able (talented) children is an important part of the current educational policies of many countries. Some countries, such as England (see Campbell & Eyre 2007), have established special programmes or academies charged with the responsibility for developing and improving policy and practice in the education of talented students. In Denmark educational differentiation is inbuilt in the consolidation act (§ 18, 1 and 2) of the Folkeskole¹, which stipulates that the organisation of the teaching shall be varied so that it corresponds to the needs and prerequisites of the individual pupil and offers challenges to all pupils. But critics claim that many able children lack challenges in this school system, which allegedly, through its allocation of resources, primarily considers the needs of less able children. On this background, new initiatives, projects, and special funding have been set up to target the needs of the so-called talented school children.

The paper will report on the findings from an educational project, which was aimed at gathering talented pupils (age 15-16) from the forms 8 and 9 of different schools in a school class once a week. The pupils in this “talent class” were offered supplementary education at a high level in the subjects of science and English, while at the same time they were following their ordinary school classes.

In the research connected to the educational project, we focused on describing the pupils with regard to social background and capital resources (Bourdieu 1986; 1977), analysing the pedagogy practised in the talent class lessons in comparison to the pupils’ ordinary lessons, especially with regard to code (Bernstein 1971), and analysing the educational intentions and context of the project, as regards talent development. With regard to the latter, the development of talent, it raised questions of how to define giftedness or talent (Phillipson & McCann 2007; Pryce et al. 2005; Winstanley 2004), how to provide educational challenges for the most able or talented (and who are they?) as well as providing general education, and how to balance appropriately between the two – the education of talented individuals and the general public (Gross 2006; Pyryt & Bosetti 2006). On the basis of analyses from the project and other research contributions, the discussion of the paper will focus on the above questions regarding the development of talent and whether this should be pursued as segregate pedagogic strategies.

¹ The Folkeskole, the public municipal school in Denmark, is a comprehensive school in the sense that it includes both primary and lower secondary education with no streaming. Approx. 84% of all pupils in basic schools attend public schools, and approx. 15% private. Apart from the compulsory forms 1 to 9, the Folkeskole comprises a voluntary pre-school year and an optional 10th year. Progression from one form to the next is usually automatic and examinations are limited to forms 9.

Interpretations and dimensions of talent

It should not be surprising that talent, high ability, or giftedness, which are words often used synonymously, can be interpreted in a number of ways. Thus variations and debates of conceptual interpretations and dimensions are seen to swing from one extreme to the other: from something originating from nature to something originating from nurture, from single capacity to multiple capacities, from focus on individual potential to focus on the social value systems defining talent.

First, the interpretations of giftedness and talent broadly vary according to which emphasis is given to either nature or nurture. According to Feldhusen (2002) the term gifted seems to carry very strong heritability connotations, while Americans prefer to believe that humans are born equal and have equal potential. And although human abilities may to some extent be genetically determined, current school philosophy (in the U.S.) believes strongly that all can learn equally well, even complex instructional material. The term gifted may further communicate a false conception to parents, teachers, and “gifted” children by conveying that certain children have “it” while others do not, that it was given as a gift, and that it is not something to be worked for (Feldhusen 2002). On this background Feldhusen advocates for the terms talent and talent development, rather than gifts and gifted education, as they might better communicate an effort-achievement orientation towards learning and instruction and allow for an acceptance of talents as differential rather than equivalent to high test scores and IQ. In accordance with this understanding, Winstanley (2004) writes that the words gifted and talented may sometimes be understood as respectively raw ability and developed power, but she maintains that sometimes it is the reverse.

This leads on to a second dimension, in which the understanding of talent varies according to whether it is conceived as multimodal or one-dimensional. It has been argued that a multidimensional concept, allowing for cultural differences in giftedness and talent to be recognised, is more appropriate than a one-dimensional measure (Campbell & Eyre 2007). An example of such a multidimensional approach is Gardner’s well-known theory of multiple intelligences, which includes eight types of intelligence: Linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily kinaesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalist intelligences (Gardner 1999). Schools tend to favour the two first types, thus contributing to a narrow understanding of intelligence as a question of linguistic and logical-mathematical skills. In this connection Winstanley (2004) mentions problems occurring when intelligence is based on school performance, because quantification of intelligence premises the testing of it, and because it is continually believed that it is possible to define a child’s level of ability by the use of a test. Following this point of view, the school practice of selecting talented pupils based on their intelligence as divined through pencil and paper tests clearly associates talent with performance rather than potential.

A third dimension concerns the social frameworks for the identification of talent. While talent is often conceptualised as a question of individual potential and performance, some writers insist that the meaning of talent must include the notion of that which is socially valued. In line with Ferrari’s notion on excellence (Ferrari 2003), talent is not an objective absolute but the subject of value judgements, judgements made against a normative standard shaped by the cultural-normative dynamic. Because by definition the environment changes from culture to culture, the criteria for giftedness in individuals will also change (Philipson & McCann 2007). This understanding also informs the model of creativity developed by Gardner (1995), which distinguishes between three elements: the person with his or her potentials; the domain of practice and knowledge (for instance music or design) that the person engages in; and the field of social institutions and authorities connected to the domain (for instance critics). In order for creativity to become manifest, the person

has not only to master the domain sufficiently to make original contributions, he or she also has to gain some measure of recognition by authorities in the field. A sociological approach compatible with this view is Bourdieu's concept of habitus (Bourdieu 1977) which sets the stage for certain expectations, and hence for judgements about talent. This conception is widely constitutive of the methodology behind our research design, which we outline below.

An important aspect of the social framework is the fact that assessment procedures used by schools to identify gifted or talented youth create a mass of pupils indirectly labelled "ungifted" or "untalented". In a wider context, doors are opened or closed as result of the contested notion of identified talent or intelligence. While such a notion is generally considered a good thing, this is only if served up in the right sized portion. On the one hand too much of it is rather threatening and sometimes the mere name of it can be isolating and unattractive; on the other hand to little is also quite problematic. Considering it important that pupils do not feel excluded and lose motivation towards achieving their potential O'reilly (2006) takes the point of view that if one uses testing as a criterion for identifying talent there must be something in place for those who do not qualify as talented.

The talent class project and the case study

As mentioned above, the talent class was a supplementary offer for pupils in the upper stage of the "Folkeskole". The class was established by local actors in the municipality of Hjørring in North Jutland, but it was partly funded by the Danish Ministry of Education under a programme calling for experimental projects supporting talented pupils. The class was organised as an after-school activity, which meant that the pupils could continue to follow their ordinary school classes. Talent class teaching took place in the afternoon once a week and also sometimes at "talent camps", where the pupils started Friday afternoon, slept at the school and finished Saturday by noon. All pupils in the municipality had the possibility of applying for the project; participants were selected on the basis of a written entrance examination. Out of 91 original applicants 33 were accepted, and two classes were established, one for eight graders and one for ninth graders. The subjects taught were English and Science. The teaching was undertaken by two lower secondary schoolteachers and by two teachers from academic upper secondary school (Gymnasium). Afternoon teaching took place at the upper secondary school, while the talent camps took place in lower secondary school.

The research in the talent class project was designed and conducted as a case study aimed at a qualitative analysis of the project in its social and political context. Thus during the one-year period of the talent class, we carried out observations of background documents and teaching activities, interviews with the pupils and the teachers, and a survey among the parents of the pupils.

The observations of the lessons in class served to get an "insider" view, which could serve as a point of reference for the subsequent interviews. The insider perspective has to be taken with a pinch of salt; as to a wide extent as observant you remain an outsider (Woods 1986; Hammersley & Atkinson 1983). In the ensuing qualitative interviews with pupils and teachers we had to balance between this insider and outsider position, between familiarity and ignorance, in our efforts to obtain information on the participant experiences from the project.

Through the interviews we examined the different perspectives of the participants in the project. We interviewed about two thirds of the pupils from the talent class towards the end of the school year and all teachers from the talent class (four teachers) as well as teachers from the different home

schools of the children (nine teachers). We applied a semi-structured method of interviewing, by which we mean asking the respondents fairly open-ended questions within such themes as perceptions of talent, personal interests in school matters, interests in the project, other spheres of interests, and their general perception of teaching and learning relations, and “outcome” of the project. The interviews lasted between twenty minutes and one hour, the longest for the teachers within the project.

Finally we carried out an Internet-based survey among the parents of the children. The purpose of this survey was to obtain information concerning the social background of the participants, and the questionnaire accordingly contained categories of questions as to family and living conditions, education and occupation of the parents, cultural and social orientations, including such aspects as school choice and experience, and leisure time activities.

Political interests in developing talent

To understand talent in the broader political context it has been necessary to ask, “What is the purpose of focusing on talent?” Talent for the purpose of establishing social justice might produce an understanding quite different from that dictated by talent for the purpose of sparking economic resurgence. Campbell and Eyre (2006, pp 462-63) have emphasised the need to deconstruct political statements about talent and accordingly have analysed a three-part rationale behind the English model: an educational about catering to the needs of all pupils, an economic about realizing potential to drive up performance in the knowledge economy, and a commitment to equity that stressed the need to identify talent in hitherto unrepresented groups.

The rationale and values underlying the educational project on talent development in the Danish context were outlined as follows:

- *“The background is a wide and increasing awareness of the fact that many able children and young people in the Danish educational system are short of proper challenges. Studies show that efforts to develop the able pupils effect on the other pupils too. (...) Aiming widely at talent development, not least within the science area, forms part of the Government’s strategy to give Denmark a leading position in the knowledge society. Able pupils should be given room to development. They are important social resources.”*²

The Danish rationale for talent development resembles the English model in at least two ways. First, the educational policy of providing educational challenges to all pupils is comparable to the English. But neither the statement of the able pupils’ lacking challenges or the claim of broader educational effects are documented in the particular context. Second, the economic argument that human resource development, giving special emphasis to high performance within the natural sciences, contributes to the provision of leadership within the knowledge society is found in both models and can be recognised as part of the widespread globalisation discourse. The emphasis of natural sciences can be seen as relating to the belief that research within this area is more easily

² Translation from the Danish text: *“Baggrunden er en bred og stigende erkendelse af, at der er mange dygtige børn og unge i det danske uddannelsessystem, der savner de rigtige udfordringer. Undersøgelser viser, at en indsats for at udvikle de dygtige elever også har en afsmittende effekt på de øvrige elever. (...) En bredere satsning på talentpleje, ikke mindst inden for det naturvidenskabelige område, indgår som et led i regeringens strategi for at gøre Danmark til et førende vidensamfund. Dygtige elever skal have plads til at udfolde sig. De er en vigtig samfundsressource.”* (Notice from Ministry of Education, February 8, 2006)

transformed into some kind of production or pay off – “*from inquiry to invoice*” (an attempt to translate the Danish catchphrase “*fra forskning til faktura*”) – which is the declared political strategy of the present liberal government in Denmark.

The third part of the English rationale as identified by Campbell and Eyre is more ambiguous in the Danish context. In the national government rationale of the Danish project there is no explicit reference to equity as a principle of social justice. However, in the official English document referred to by Campbell and Eyre the equity element seems also to quite weak. The document challenges the assumption that giftedness is unequally distributed among social groupings and points to the fact that narrow social structures may prevent the identification and unfolding of giftedness in some groups, and argues for a conscious effort to compensate for this; but the context of the argument is efficiency in recruitment for social elites rather than social justice in a broader sense. Thus, although the Danish documents do not refer to equity, the difference from the English rationale is limited.

In the local discourse of the educational project in question, a different argument concerning equity is present. It was stated as an expected outcome that the project “*would create a common understanding, among school boards, teachers, parents and pupils, that the most able and talented pupils could be included as natural part and general objects clause for the School’s activities*” (Application for financial support). Thus the project contained an “inclusive strategy”³ for the educational system, aiming at keeping the highly able pupils in the comprehensive public schools rather than having them opt for private sector schools. On the one hand this can be seen as an attempt to preserve an equal distribution of resources and opportunities through public policy. On the other hand the text indirectly says that at present the talented pupils are not a “natural part” of the common school system, and thus suggests that that the public school system is sacrificing the spirit of competition and excellence. Although indirect, the argument is in line with criticism that the school system promotes mediocrity in the name of social justice, over merit and standards of excellence (cf. Brown 1997).

Participant reflections on talent

The pupils in the talent project were asked: “How do you understand talent?” In principle this is a very open question, but as the pupils were asked because of their participation in a school activity and the interviews were conducted in the school it is no surprise that almost all responses focus on talent in an educational context. Most responses were brief, possibly because the question was perceived as abstract. Following this general question about the concept of talent, the pupils were asked to describe their own talents. The responses were marked by some reluctance to engage in self-praise but were nevertheless more elaborate than the responses to the general question.

To most of the pupils talent meant that the talented person performs better than the majority in some domain. One of them said “... *they are people who are a little above average, not really so much*”. Another says “... *well, that you are good at something, like, better than others*”. The interpretation of talent as performing better than the majority does not tell what kind of qualities enable persons to do this. However, many of the pupils’ statements indicate such qualities, which can be grouped in two types.

³ Inclusion in this case meant gathering the talented pupils in a classroom of “ability peers” (selected by testing) once a week as an after school activity, while they stayed in their ordinary classes at their respective schools during school hours.

One type of quality that the pupils associate with talent is *being especially interested and willing to invest time and energy in an activity*. Examples of such quality in responses to the general question are statements like “...eager to try a little more, challenge ourselves a little more” and “... people who are clever and would like to learn something as well”. In reflecting on own talent one of the pupils elaborated on this:

- ... That is a good question; my talent, I don't know, it's a question of work morale I think, that maybe I am willing to push the throttle a little harder when there is work to be done and willing to use more time on the school, like this thing now (the talent project), more than most of the others (...) if you look at the marks you can see that it is reflected in the marks, how much time people are willing to use and what it means to them if they are good or not..”

The other type of quality is *finding it easy to perform and achieve*. Examples of this are statements like “Talent ... I suppose it is finding things easy, having things come naturally, that you don't have to think about it so much, that you find it easy to understand”. Asked about own talent one of the pupils describes it as follows: “I find the lessons here (in the ordinary school) easy, it is really no problem, you know, it just comes easy to me”.

As could be expected given the context of the interviews, most responses concerning the pupils' own talents contained references to different school subjects. Many of them pointed to special interests and abilities in the subject of mathematics (which is a main subject in the talent class), while others indicated a broader interest.

- “I have always been good at the academic subjects and those kind of things (...) I have always been quite good, you know like in general, but I do best in the science subjects and in subjects like Danish and English (...) it has just always (...) I have always found these things easy”.

An important aspect of the interpretation of talent is how and how much the talented persons differ from others. As suggested by the idea of talented persons being “a little above average” the pupils found the difference limited, also when asked about their social relations to peers and classmates in their ordinary school.

- Interviewer: “Does this (the talent activity) make you feel different from your mates here?”
- Pupil: “No, not in most areas, but you know I sometimes feel I am the person in my class being the most interested, putting the most into it, also the homework; like, if we have to hand in a report in physics or something, then I am clearly the one spending most hours preparing it at home, but that is probably also because I have this idea that things have to be perfect”.

In their responses many of the pupils distanced themselves more or less clearly from widely-held stereotyped ideas about talent that circulate in their surroundings – family, school, friends, media. The pupils have probably themselves used these stereotypes, but participation in the talent class has confronted them with the question whether these widely-held notions about talent fit themselves as persons. One pupil said:

- *“But I think, actually, it has been described a bit wrong because – I feel a little bad about being called talented because – it makes me feel, when other people hear it, that I would see myself as a little better than them. Or like... I think this is for pupils with more of an academic interest (...) Its not that I feel stupid, I just think that – there are none of us who are like totally brainy kids, you know – it’s more a question of what you are interested in.”*

This pupil does not want to be identified with stereotyped images of “wise” or “brainy” or as someone feeling better than others, because in this way she would distance herself from the community of her daily friends and classmates. But the reservations towards the widely-held notions about talent also spring from their experience of participating in the talent class, as neither themselves nor the other pupils in this class match the talent stereotypes. One pupil said:

- *“From the outset it was very much nerds, that’s what I thought when I heard about this talent class (...) But it is not like that at all when you have met these people, really not like that. Then you can see that talent is a different thing, you understand that it’s those people who can do things and take the trouble to get things done”.*

Several of the pupils said that in their view the project should find another name, something without the word “talent”. In fact they had developed micro-strategies to avoid the word when they talked to their daily classmates. They would say that they were participating in an activity “at the “gymnasium””, name it “supplementary school”, or humorously talk about being “with the nerds”. However, neither the responses of the pupils nor our impressions from the schools when we interviewed the pupils indicated that they experienced this as a major problem. Most of them seemed to have good social relations in peer groups in their daily schools, while they also liked participating in the talent class.

The general picture is that the pupils in the talent class did not see talent as a question of outstanding ability. Some of them described talent as finding it easy to perform in given domains, but the predominant view is that talent was a question of being more interested and willing to work harder to achieve results in school. The pupils in the talent class did not see themselves as very different from their classmates in daily school, and in general they did not feel excluded or held back. Because of this they found stereotypical notions about talent misleading and tried to avoid them.

The backgrounds and interests of the talented pupils

From the survey data it was obvious that the total amount of capital resources (Bourdieu 1986) of the talented pupils was generally high. Most of them came from stable families, comprising both of the parents and one, two, or three sisters and brothers. They lived in owner housing and had usually lived in the same place for most of their childhood. Likewise, the great majority of the pupils had highly educated and socially well positioned parents. They spent their holidays abroad, in many cases both summer and winter, and all of the pupils had visited several foreign countries. So obviously, they were well equipped with both economic and cultural capital.

The parents were widely involved in decisions regarding school and career decisions of their children. In all cases they expected their child to pursue further education to university level, although they emphasised that these were expectations based on the decisions of the children and that they did not want to impose certain career decisions on them. In some cases, the parents had

been actively involved in choosing the right school (private) and thus showed adherence to the above-mentioned view that private education is better safeguarding the guaranty of excellence in school. Generally, the parents strongly supported their children in attending the talent class, but at the same time emphasised that the participation was based on the child's autonomous decision.

The distinctive characteristics of these pupils and their parents can be highlighted by a fairly recent study of the role of parents in educational choice in Denmark (Rambøll Consulting 2004). The study was mainly based on survey of a representative sample of young people in the age group 13-20 and their parents. Using cluster analysis the authors constructed four profiles of different types of Danish pupils and parents. One of the profiles, which included approximately one third of the young people, was given the heading "We agree on a higher education". The young people in this group are doing well in school (58 pct of them have very high average grades in school) and generally enter the Gymnasium and move on to different types of higher education. They are very conscious about their choices of education and active in finding information about possible options. Among their parents, 70 pct of the mothers and 58 pct of the fathers have attended higher education. The parents have confidence in their children's ability to choose, but they are still keen to be involved in the process. It seems clear to us that the talent class pupils and parents belong to this segment.

Concerning social capital, to which Bourdieu (1986) includes such resources that are linked to possession of durable networks of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition that can be mobilised when necessary, e.g. in school life, this was also an important resource. About half the parents occupied positions of trust through organisation or board memberships. Some were members of school boards and had been abreast of knowing about the talent class and providing their children with relevant information about it. Thus, one of the pupils told us,

- "Well, my father is on the school board, so he brought home this paper (about the talent class), which was to be handed out shortly after. He showed it to me and asked me, just for fun I think, whether that was something for me. Then I read it, and I just got crazy about the idea of it and thought, this is just for me. So the next week or so, when it was handed out, I immediately signed up for it."

When asked about their initial interests in joining the talent class, the pupils also gave such reasons that they wanted *more challenges* in their school life or were looking for *schoolmates with the same interests* in school as themselves. Such reasons, close to the formula of the project description, were typically written in their applications for joining the talent class, whereas in the interviews they would rather refer to some adult person, either a teacher or parent, having encouraged them to joining the talent class. But then again, it was emphasised by both the pupils and their parents that they had made the decision themselves.

Furthermore, the talented pupils in our study were characterised by them typically attending many after-school activities. Sometimes they were engaged in organised music or sports activities at a highly competitive level, meaning that such activities might carry some resemblances to the competition endeavours they devoted to their school work to gain or maintain superior positions at school. In that way, social position, or class, as shaped by the possessions of capital resources was seen to shape the contours of the children's daily life and thus provide class variation in the texture of socialisation (Lareau 2000).

As also pointed out by Lareau (2000), childhood experiences are likely to differ in the potential advantages they offer in the long-range process of social stratification. Thus an American study (Lareau 2000) comparing middle class children with their working class counterparts found that the middle class children through their many and varied leisure time activities had been in a wider variety of situations, often with more opportunities to perform and to gain experience and practice, which provided them with different repertoires to draw on as they moved into other spheres of life.

Views and experiences of teaching in regard to talent development

From viewpoints of the teachers, the development of talent was highly associated with the demand for differentiated teaching according to the abilities of each child. This goes for the lower secondary schoolteachers, whose professional experiences are linked to compulsory education in the *Folkeskole*, whereas the upper-secondary⁴ schoolteachers expressed rather different views on teaching and talent development. Their understanding of excellent teaching and learning took its point of departure in the curriculum and its subjects, not in the individual learner.

The actual teaching in the talent class however, as it appeared in our observations and from the interview descriptions, was pupil centred. As opposed to ordinary lessons, lessons in the talent class were weakly framed (Bernstein 1971), meaning that both teachers and pupils had an active part to play, deciding on the content and learning by doing. But the conditions of teaching in the talent class were also very different from the conditions normally dominating in school, as there were fewer and more homogenous pupils in the class⁵, which further meant more time for each pupil. As opposed to conditions in school where the pupils are normally submitted to the strong framing of fixed curricula and examination demands, there were no such regulations in the talent class, which left the pupils room for more decision-making and experimental learning.

The weak framing with its greater freedom of movement can be seen as linked to the developmental character of the talent class. It was the first year to be carried through, things were planned ad hoc, and it was very much up to the teachers to develop the set of courses. The lower secondary schoolteachers that viewed the talent class as an opportunity to develop professionally perceived this as highly motivating. They also perceived it as a privileged situation to work with such a homogenous and relatively small group of pupils that, contrary to what they were used to, proved interested and never caused disciplinary problems in class. In contrast, the gymnasium teachers perceived it as a challenge to follow an open curriculum inspired so much by the pupils, as they focused on the problems the weak frames might pose, though they seemingly did not pose such problems, with regard to motivating pupils that might not be interested.

⁴ In Denmark, education is compulsory for children between seven and sixteen years of age (primary and lower secondary education in the *Folkeskole*), while admission to general upper secondary education depends on the completion of the nine years of basic education, the fulfilment of certain subject requirements, and application. Nearly all school-leavers continue in upper secondary education: about 41% in vocational colleges and 53% in schools providing general upper secondary education (mainly at the "Gymnasiums"). The aim of the Gymnasium is to provide general education as well as to prepare the students for continued studies. There is a core of obligatory subjects as well as some optional subjects, teachers must be university graduates at what corresponds to MA or BSc level, and the Ministry of Education must approve all materials offered at the examinations.

⁵ The average class size is about 20 pupils, but legislation allows up to 28 pupils in a class. There were 15-18 pupils in the talent class.

In spite of the predominant weak framing, the talent class was generally taught according to the very subject-specific terms that Bernstein conceptualises as strong classification. Classification is a matter of boundary, definition, maintenance and validation of domains of knowledge, and thus refers to the degree of boundary maintenance between contents (Bernstein 1971). Lessons were given within the boundaries of school subjects, each subject being taught by one teacher, with no cooperation between the teachers and hardly any interdisciplinary work. This strong classification and understanding of knowledge was fairly pronounced among all of the talent class teachers, but especially among the gymnasium teachers that associated talent development with the development of pupil potentials within school subject-specific areas accompanied by more segregate strategies.

Conclusion and discussion: For and against segregate pedagogic strategies

Should talent development be pursued as a segregate pedagogy (setting up special talent classes as in the case study). This question is often the focus of discussion about talent development, and if not, it is present in the background.

In education there is an inherent tension between dreams of excellence and concerns about equality. When talent is in focus, support for the talented rises, while the focus on equity seems to decrease this support. This tension poses a practical dilemma to the teachers, to whom the sheer range of pupil achievement in the mixed ability classroom can be daunting. There is a powerful incentive for them to bring the “bottom up”, to enhance the achievement of the slower pupils, which means that not only are they assisting those children but they are also making their own task somewhat easier by narrowing the huge achievement range. The talented pupils pose more of a problem. By allowing them to advance, the teacher is assisting them to move even further ahead of the other pupils and thereby increasing the achievement range in the classroom. On this background it has been proposed that schools committed to inclusion include the slower learners in the mainstream classroom, and include the talented learners, part time or full time, in a group of ability peers (Gross 2006). Gross further advances the argument that talented pupils strongly prefer to learn and socialise with children at their own stage of intellectual and emotional development, and when access to these preferred companions is restricted, they may either mask their talent to be accepted by their classmates or they may become isolates.

On the other hand, it has been argued that the intellectual and social-emotional needs of talented pupils might just as well be accommodated in regular classrooms (Pyryt & Bosetti 2006). The inability of the teacher to effectively differentiate is considered the most important barrier to the effective accommodation of talented pupils in regular classrooms. The so-called accountability movement that is dominating public education is another barrier to appropriate education for intellectually talented pupils. Moon et al. (in Pyryt & Bosetti 2006) have reported that even in classrooms functioning above grade level, more than half the teachers would teach to the test and omit content that is not on the test. Teachers report spending the entire time before the test on test-related content, providing instruction on test-taking strategies, reviewing and completing previously released versions of the test, and practising completing the types of items on the test, whereas the assignment of long-term projects that could enhance the pupils creative and problem-solving skills is a rare occurrence. While other factors, such as societal attitudes and parental demands, pose barriers to this, Pyryt and Bosetti (2006) conclude that it is possible to accommodate talented pupils in regular classrooms provided that teachers allow them to learn at an appropriate pace, develop their critical and creative thinking skills, pursue their passions, represent their knowledge in a variety of ways, and interact with mental-age peers.

These are complex issues, and we will not try to “take sides” in this brief paper. But we find it striking that both the proponents and the opponents in this debate seem to take the traditional organisation of schooling for granted. Schools are seen as composed of one specific type of standardised elements: classes of pupils in one age group being taught by one teacher in one subject, in one room, and in one period of time. Consequently differentiation is interpreted as the individual teacher attending to wide range of achievement levels in the individual class. This is of course the reality of most school systems; but it is important to remember that there are very many alternative ways of organising teaching and learning.

Our study of the talent class in North Jutland emphasizes the importance of seeing the questions of pedagogy in close relationship to the questions of objectives, the “what kind of talent” and the “why should we focus on talent” discussions. Regarding the latter, the identified purpose of the talent project was twofold; an educational argument of providing appropriate challenges to all pupils and an economic argument of developing talents for the knowledge society. Arguments about the contribution of talent development to social inclusion of individuals and equal opportunities for all citizens were not visible; but in a research perspective such questions should be included.

The objective of talent development also has implications for the interpretation of talent that lies behind the talent class project. In the Danish framework for talent development in education the interpretation of talent is clearly associated to the school subjects, not one specific subject but the academic subjects in general and the science subjects in particular. So, it is based on a narrow definition of talent as school intelligence according to a fairly one-dimensional measure as opposed to multimodal conceptions. In accordance with this narrow definition, talent is associated with performance rather than potential, as the talented pupils in the project were identified by means of testing. The talented pupils generally came from social groupings that possess high educational capital and social status in society.

Through the interviews it appeared that the pupils and their parents attached to their participation in the project an importance of being able to select and decide themselves. In their understandings of own talents they emphasised such personal competences as interest in school and willingness to work and achieve results in school rather than outstanding abilities within certain subjects. These understandings and the social characteristics of the pupils indicate that interpretations of talent are indeed related to value judgements and normative standards.

Even if talent and achievement is not an objective absolute, it seems obvious from the statements of both pupils and teachers that there are important achievement ranges in their regular classrooms. Although their talents did not seem to pose particular problems for the talented pupils in the way that they felt socially excluded from their regular classes (at least according to what they told us) they still found and built up a strong sense of social community in the talent class, where they matched each others abilities to a higher degree than normally experienced. The talent class also formed an interesting base for educational development, as it highlighted some differences between teaching framed by experiments and teaching framed by curricula and examination demands. In this special schooling activity for pupils identified as talents, both teachers and pupils took much more active parts than they normally did at school. In this way, it could be argued that talent classes provide the educators as well as the pupils with additional challenges to the ones offered within the present framework of the educational system.

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